

ARCHITECTURE IN THE BO, 'BRUG CHU, AND CO NE COUNTIES,
GANNAN TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE, GANSU

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ABSTRACT

Thirty-nine images of architecture in The bo, 'Brug chu, and Co ne counties (Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, China) are presented. The author also relates his experiences of travelling through the area in 2010.

KEYWORDS

architecture, 'Brug chu, Co ne, Gannan, The bo

INTRODUCTION¹

In the winter of 2009-10, I traveled to Co ne, The bo, and 'Brug chu counties in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, to photographically document local architecture. I expected to take photographs of local houses, fences, walls, bridges, water mills, and *ma Ni* wheels. I decided to focus on local architectural styles and building materials in order to highlight regional differences. I was excited to take such a long journey, and started out on the first of January from my home in Zho 'ong dpyis Village, located between Reb gong County town and Bla brang Monastery. Because this was my first time to travel so far by myself, I was initially anxious.

I arrived in Bla brang after a two-hour bus trip and immediately departed to Gtsod City, capital of Gannan and two hours from Bla brang by bus. I met a relative in Gtsod who worked part-time in a hotel and stayed with him for a night. He showed me a map, pointing out the three counties I would travel to and advised me on how to keep safe: not to stare at people, not to take out my camera in crowds, and not to stay out late at night. He and his colleagues suggested I would have a difficult time: "You won't understand their dialect and they won't understand yours."² This made me more anxious. Based on their description of the area, I decided to go to The bo County first, then to 'Brug chu, and finally to Co ne.

The next morning, I took the bus from Gtsod to The bo County Town, where I arrived after six hours. On the way, part of the road was unpaved and covered with ice in which several trucks and buses were stuck. Fortunately, my bus passed easily. The mountains beside the road were steep and high, and traversing them gave me the feeling of slipping between a wolf's fangs.

I had a classmate in The bo who lived in a small mountain village southwest of the county town. I phoned him as soon as I arrived and he invited me to come to his home in Brag sgam nang

¹ I thank Gerald Roche, Elena McKinlay, and Kelly Ward for assistance in editing the text and images.

² Locals in The bo and surrounding areas refer to the dialect spoken there as The bo skad 'The bo Language'. Although clearly related, it is basically unintelligible for speakers of other varieties of A mdo Tibetan.

Village and stay for several days. He came, picked me up, and we then went to his village by taxi. To get there, we passed through a wide valley, the sides of which were covered by thick forest.

According to a village elder, the village had been given its name based on its geographic location. Brag sgam nang literally means 'inside a rocky box', and as I beheld the village for the first time, I saw that this name was no exaggeration. The small village was surrounded by white rocky mountains on every side. Seeing this magnificent view made me recall the words of my relative, a *sngags pa* 'tantric practitioner', who had been to several places in The bo County to undertake *grong chog*³ during his youth. He had told me, while shaking his head slowly in disbelief, "Thick forests cover the area and just looking at the steep mountains will frighten you. There are many wild animals there." What he said turned out to be true, except for the wild animals; perhaps they had all been hunted to extinction.

I took photos of local architectural styles and building materials of houses, fences, walls, and water mills in Brag sgam nang. For the first several days, my classmate assisted me as I walked around the village but, as I became more familiar with the area, I was able to work alone. Late each afternoon, I returned to my classmate's home and asked his family members to tell me about what I had taken pictures of that day.

I joined a game of basketball with some young men one day while out taking photos in the village. Seeing their impressive physiques reminded me of what my grandfather had said before my departure, "In the old days,⁴ The bo nang⁵ was a hive of bandits. People there were wild and short-tempered." As I played basketball, I thought about what Grandfather had said. Not understanding their local dialect made it very difficult for me to communicate with the basketball players, increasing my suspicion of them. However, all the

³ *Grong chog* is a form of itinerant mendicant religious practice through which monks and other religious practitioners generate income. As the practitioner travels he is hosted by families who pay cash and provide food and lodging in exchange for chanting and other religious services.

⁴ I.e., prior to 1958.

⁵ The term, The bo nang, 'Inner The bo' is a synonym for The bo County.

villagers treated me well and were very kind to me, which made me realize that Grandfather was talking about the past; the world is a very different place now.

At first I was mute among the villagers, but after several days I was able to have simple conversations with children. For example I could say, "What is your name?" "Let's go!" "Could you help me?" and, "Which school do you go to?" This helped me to be more independent.

After several days of taking photos and getting to know the villagers, a young man informed me that there was a large cave above the village. My classmate and I drove up to the cave on motorbike, and asked his father about the cave after we returned. He was unsure whether what he told us was true, but said, "Long ago, King Khri srong lde btsan⁶ sent 3,000 Tibetan soldiers to this area to guard the border of his kingdom. When the army first arrived, they set up camp in that cave." As I struggled to understand this short, simple story, I realized the importance of understanding the local dialect when undertaking research.

The bo County has much forest and all local buildings are constructed of wood. For example, the local two-story houses are all wooden, as are fences, water-turned *ma Ni* wheels, and flourmills. This is very different from my home area – Zho 'ong dpyis and the surrounding region – where wood is a scarce and highly valued building material. Except for house pillars and some carved decorations, most construction in Zho 'ong dpyis is rammed earth.

Houses in Brag sgam nang typically have two floors and unlike many other Tibetan areas, lack an enclosed courtyard. House walls are made from several different materials in at least three styles. The first floor is generally built from stacked, untreated logs. The second floor may be made from stacked planks or wattle and daub.

I decided to leave for 'Brug chu County after a week in Brag sgam nang, and asked several villagers and taxi drivers for advice about which places to visit there. They all recommended I visit 'Bab bzang Township, which is the only Tibetan township in 'Brug chu

⁶ King Khri srong lde btsan (742-794 CE), the thirty-eighth king of the Tibetan Empire.

County .

I departed The bo on 12 January and arrived in 'Brug chu County town,⁷ where I was surprised to not see any Tibetans. All the citizens seemed to be Han Chinese, although I did see some Salar⁸ restaurants. Local taxi drivers and the owner of the hotel where I stayed helped me locate Tibetan communities and Tibetan architecture. They also explained how to reach 'Bab bzang Township. Following their instructions, I went to 'Bab bzang Township, hoping to find Tibetans.

When I reached 'Bab bzang, I saw no one wearing Tibetan-style clothes, nor did I hear anyone speaking Tibetan. People seemed totally Sinicized. For example, in Upper 'Bab bzang Village, I met an old man who said he was Tibetan, and had a Tibetan name, but wore a black suit and spoke the local Chinese dialect to me when introducing his village.

Unlike in The bo County, there are no forests in 'Brug chu. Locals use stone to build walls, fences, toilets, and houses – almost everything except for such furniture as cupboards and tables.

Slate is used in construction in several ways. One method is to lay stones randomly one upon the other, while another method is to place them in rows, with each row slanting in a different direction. Mortar is placed between the stones and the rows. Wooden pillars are used to support walls and houses. I took many photos of styles and materials in 'Bab bzang. Since I did not know anyone, I went alone to unfamiliar places.

Most houses in the area have two floors. I did not locate any water mills, monasteries, or *ma Ni* wheels in 'Brug chu County.

I also went to Danian, a nearby township, that was settled by Han migrants from other provinces and from other places in Gansu. I met four Han youths in the village, one of whom informed me that his grandfather had came from Shanxi Province.

After a week in 'Brug chu County, I departed to Co ne County Town, the last stop on my journey. I had previously asked a friend from Co ne County to recommend some relevant sites to me, and he

⁷ This town was partially destroyed by a landslide on 22 July 2010.

⁸ An Islamic minority group mostly resident in Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, Haidong Region, Qinghai Province, China.

had listed several places, one of which was Chos dbal bzang.

After reaching Co ne, local taxi drivers told me that Chos dbal bzang had a large Tibetan population, so I decided to go there first. Chos dbal bzang is located in southern Co ne County, bordering The bo County. It has much forest and, therefore, the architecture is similar to that of The bo County. For example, all the materials are wood and all the houses have two floors. However, one important difference is evident in house roofs: Chos dbal bzang houses have flat roofs that are covered in earth while roofs in The bo are peaked and covered in wooden tiles weighed down by stones.

I departed to a Tibetan township in the north of Co ne County after a day in Chos dbal bzang. This township neighbors Gtsod, and the houses there were very different from those in southern Co ne. All houses were single-story, rammed earth houses, almost identical to houses in Bla brang and Reb gong. Seeing these houses made me feel that I was closer to my home area.

I visited several large monasteries in Co ne County but, as these monasteries were Dge lugs pa, the structure of the temples, the paintings, and the materials were almost identical to those in such areas as Bla brang and Reb gong. I visited Dar rgyas gling, the largest monastery in Co ne County, which is located on a hill two kilometers above Co ne County Town. A monk at the monastery told me that, with 900 years of history, Dar rgyas gling is the oldest monastery in A mdo. It was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt in the 1980s, when painters were invited from Reb gong. I was unable to discern any architectural features distinguishing Dar rgyas gling from Dge lugs monasteries in Reb gong.

On January twenty-fourth, I returned to Zho 'ong dpyis with 620 photographs of the architecture of The bo, 'Brug chu, and Co ne counties. I realized that even though these three areas neighbor each other, they have very different architectural styles. Most houses in the area have two floors but lack enclosed courtyards. However construction materials, methods, and styles differ throughout the region.

I present the best images from this trip in the pictures that follow to illustrate the unique architectural characteristics of each location and, thus, highlight the diversity of the area.

FIGURES

- Figure 1. Tshogs chen 'du khang of Dar rgyas gling Monastery, Co ne County, is said to be the monastery's largest temple and able to accomodate all the monastery's monks during chanting sessions. There are approximately 900 monks and all come here to chant every day.
- Figure 2. Brag sgam nang Village is surrounded by rocky mountains. All the houses have two floors. Houses were traditionally made from wood, but villagers have recently begun using brick.
- Figure 3. This uninhabited, dilapidated, wooden house with two floors was a *grwa shags* 'monk's quarters'.
- Figure 4. This is the second floor of a house in The bo County. The roof is peaked and livestock fodder is stored in a large space between the roof and the ceiling of the second floor.
- Figure 5. Almost every part of this house is wood. A shrine, storeroom, and several bedrooms are on the second floor. The first floor is used as a living room in winter. Livestock are housed separately on the first floor.
- Figure 6. These are two types of house walls in The bo. Wattle and daub is used on the second floor, while the first floor is made of logs.
- Figure 7. This *me srung* 'fire guard' room is just above Brag sgam nang. Since all houses are wood, villagers post a rotating lookout here from dusk until midnight every day to watch for fires in the village. Village households take turns to man the lookout, and other villagers come to chat with them while they are on guard.
- Figure 8. Roadside fences.
- Figure 9. Wood is used for fences.
- Figure 10. These small structures contain *ma Ni* wheels turned by water.
- Figure 11. Newly built and painted *ma Ni* wheel houses.
- Figure 12. The toilet entrance is on the second floor. It is built high up by a field, facilitating transport of manure to the field.

Figure 13. Villagers refer to these structures as *blo bzo*. Crops are hung here to dry after harvest, out of reach of livestock. They are located by the road, making it convenient for villagers to transport their crops home by tractor.

Figure 14. These *blo bzo* are located by a field.

Figure 15. A water mill in a big valley that sometimes floods after heavy rain. The mill is downhill from a boulder that redirects flood waters around it.

Figure 16. 'Bab bzang Tibetan village in 'Brug chu County is locally considered to be the only Tibetan community in the county. All houses have two floors and are made of stone.

Figure 17. This slate house in 'Brug chu County features mortar between the stones. Wooden pillars are used inside the rooms.

Figure 18. This family house is surrounded by stone walls. The second floor is generally for storage, while people live on the ground floor.

Figure 19. Construction of this house had just begun.

Figure 20. Angled vertical slate slabs are mortared with cement.

Figure 21. A stone fence made by stacking stones horizontally without mortar.

Figure 22. A stone toilet.

Figure 23. Stone is used to construct roads, fences, gate-posts, and houses.

Figure 24. Drying racks in a yard surrounded by a fence.

Figure 25. A family home in northern Co ne County, neighboring Gtsod. Local houses are made of rammed earth

Figure 26. A house in the beginning stage of construction.

Figure 27. A house in northern Co ne. The house and the surrounding courtyard wall are made of rammed earth.

Figure 28. Rammed earth is used to construct fences around fields in northern Co ne.

Figure 29. Yul mdzes tshal Village in southern Co ne County neighbors The bo County. Much timber is locally available, so houses here and in The bo are very similar except for flat roofs as in this image.

Figure 30. This family house in Yul mdzes tshal is mostly made of wood. Guest rooms and the family shrine are on the second floor and a living room and kitchen are on the first floor.

Figure 31. A wooden fence in Yul mdzes tshal resembles those in The bo County.

Figure 32. Drying racks in Yul mdzes tshal Village are located near a road.

Figure 33. Such gates are only seen in Co ne County. It has two entrances: a large, wide one and a small, narrow one.

Figure 34. A stupa near Co ne County's largest monastery, Dar rgyas gling.

Figure 35. This curtain protects the temple from wind and sunshine. Such features are rarely seen in newly built temples.

Figure 36. This small temple is in Yul mdzes tshal. People come here to circumambulate in their spare time.

Figure 37. This stupa-like temple is in Dar rgyas gling Monastery.

Figure 38. Statues on an exterior wall of a temple in Dar rgyas gling Monastery.

Figure 39. A detail of the statues seen in Figure 38.









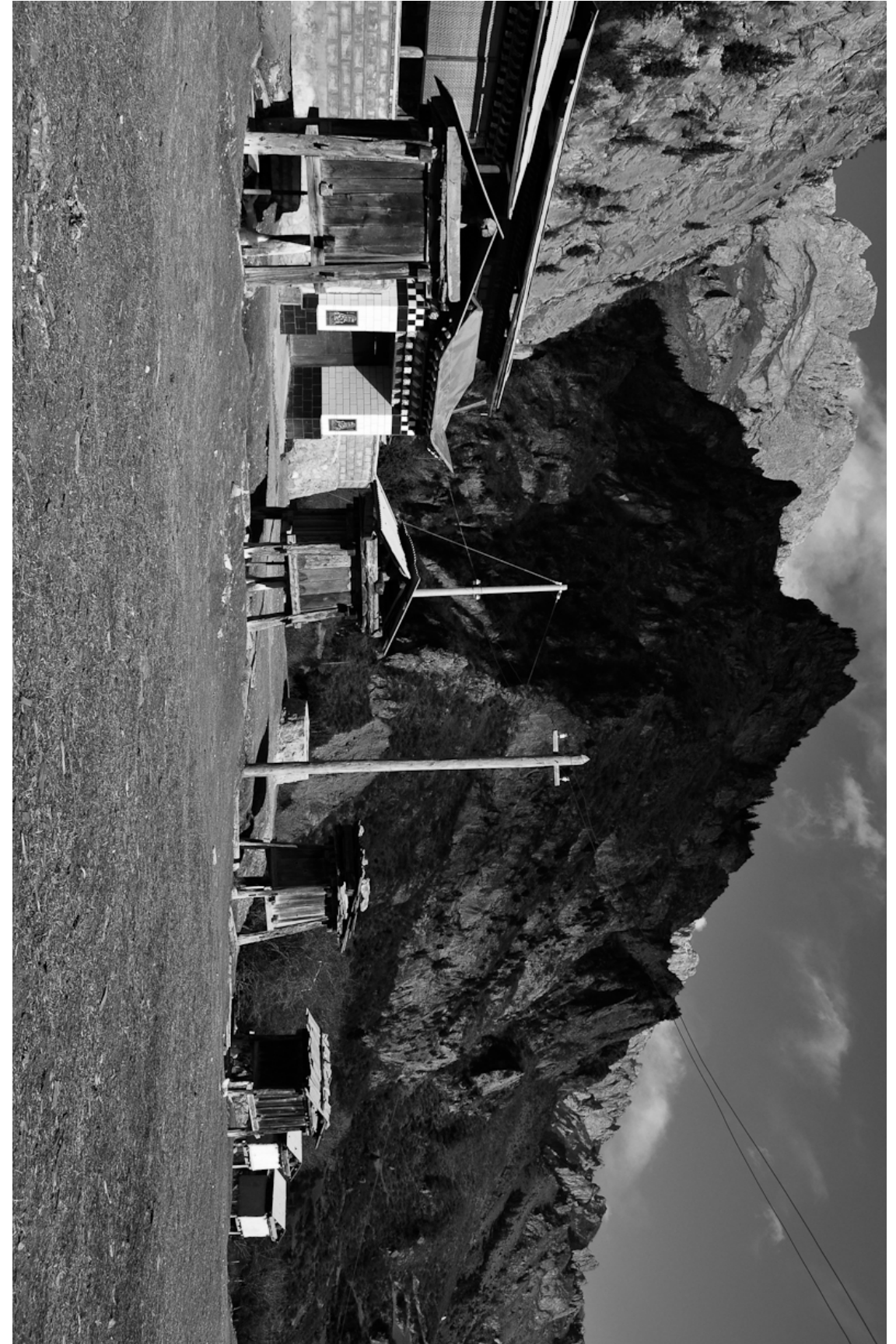












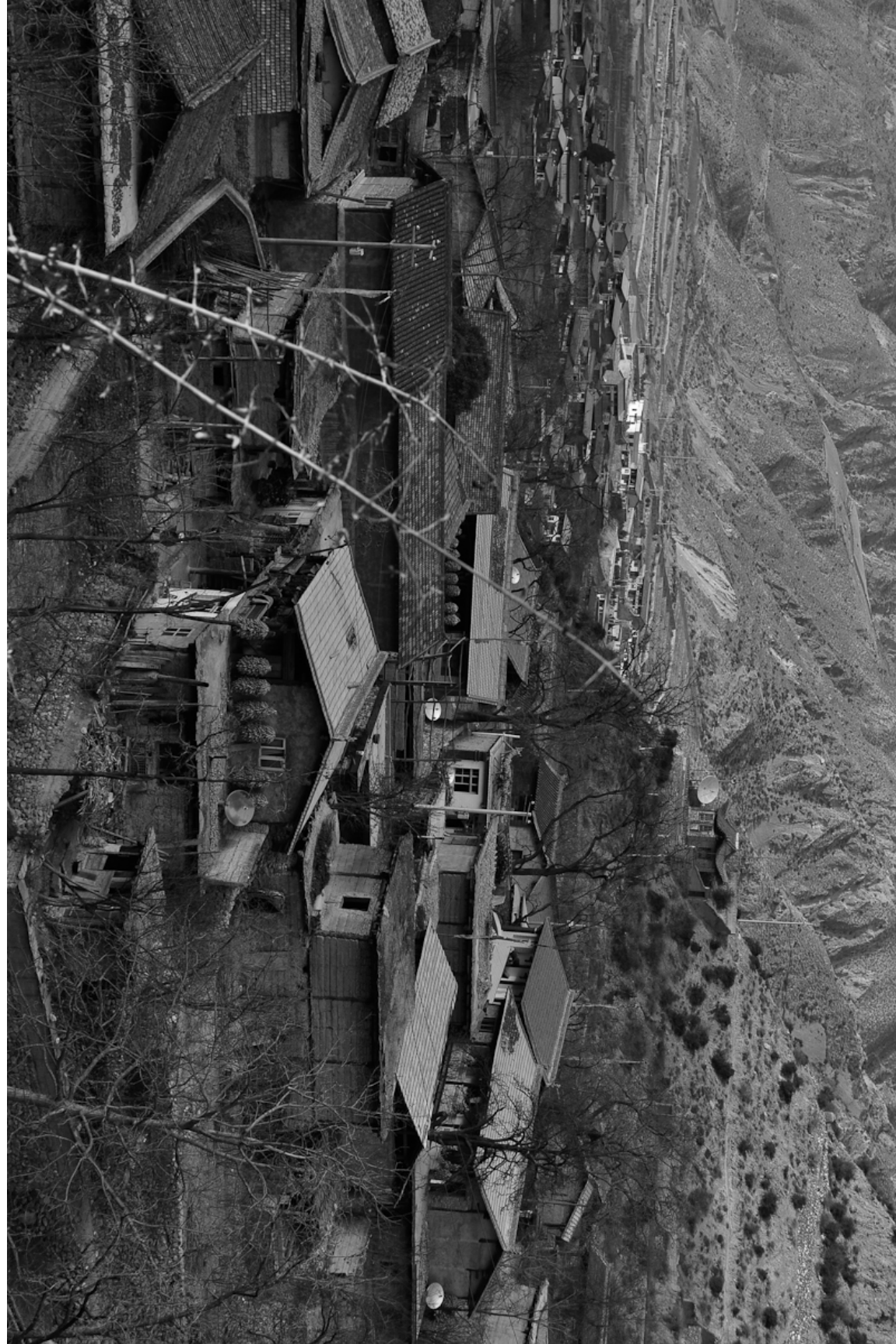


































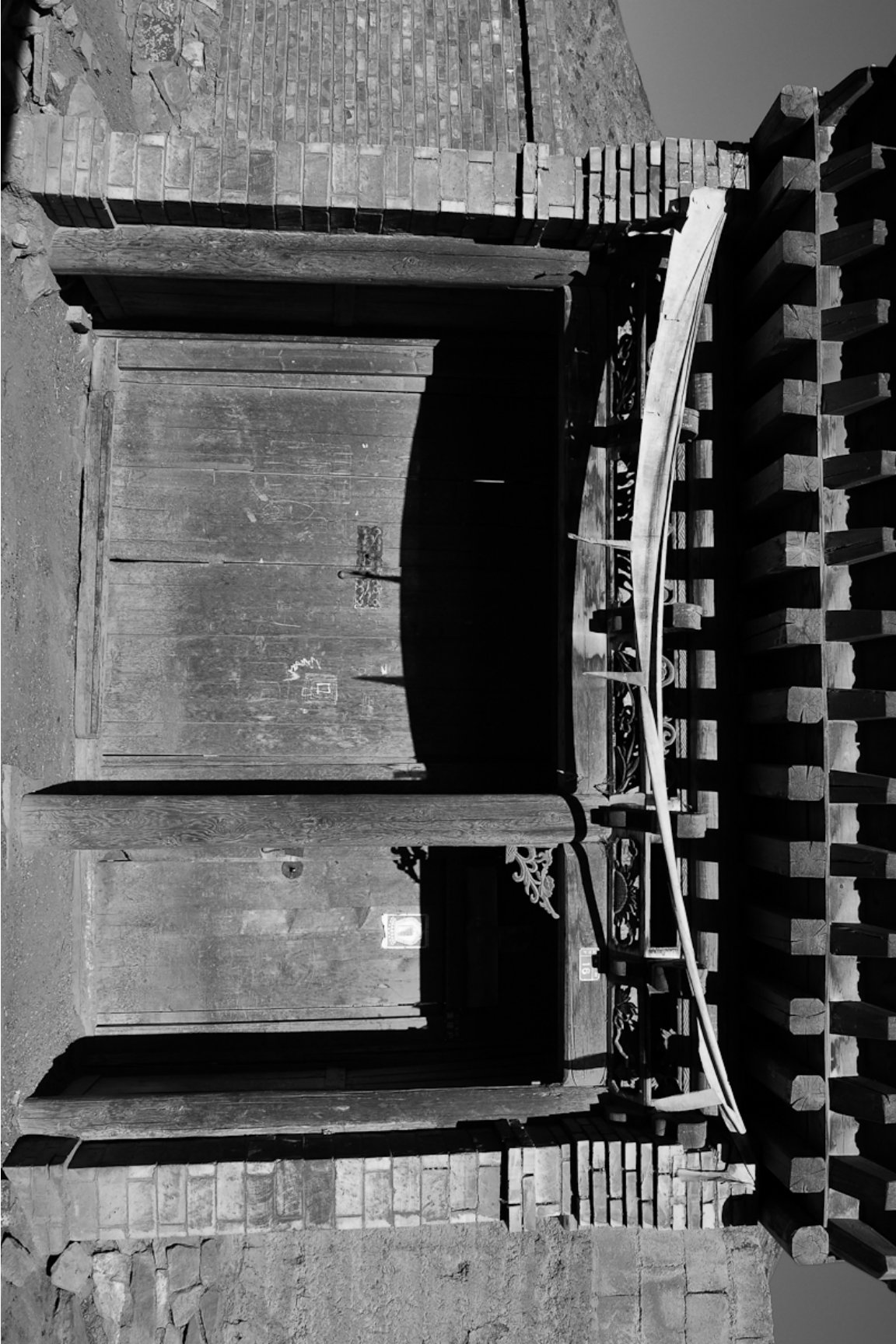
























NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Bab bzang འབབ་བཟང་།
 'Brug chu འབྲུག་ཚུ།
 A mdo ཨ་མདོ།
 Bla brang བླ་བར་།
 blo bzo བློ་བཟང་།
 Brag sgam nang བྲག་སྒྲམ་ནང་།
 Chos dbal bzang ཆོས་དབལ་བཟང་།
 Chos dbying rdo rje ཆོས་དབྱིང་རྡོ་རྗེ།
 Co ne ཙོ་ནེ།
 Danian 大年
 Dar rgyas gling དར་རྒྱས་གླིང་།
 Dge lugs pa དགེ་ལུགས་པ།
 Gannan 甘南
 Gansu 甘肅
 grong chog རྩོང་ཆོག་།
 grwa shags གྲ་ཤགས།
 Gtsod གཙོད།
 Haidong 海東
 Khri srong lde btsan ཁྲི་སྟོང་ལྡེ་བཙན།
 ma Ni མ་ཏི།
 me srung མེ་སྟུང་།
 Qinghai 青海
 Reb gong རེབ་གོང་།
 Shanxi 山西
 sngags pa སྒགས་པ།
 The bo ཐེ་བོ།
 The bo nang ཐེ་བོ་ནང་།
 The bo skad ཐེ་བོ་སྐད།
 Tshogs chen 'du khang ཚོགས་ཆེན་འདུ་ཁང་།
 Xunhua 循化
 Yul mdzes tshal ཡུལ་མཛེས་ཚལ།
 Zho 'ong dpyis ཞོ་འོང་དབྱིས།